

March 28, 2006- Rep. Rahall Takes Leadership Role In Vietnam Veterans' Memorial Debate

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WASHINGTON, DC - U.S. Rep. Nick J. Rahall (D-WV) gave the following statement on the House floor Tuesday, March 28, 2006:

Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent to revise and extend my remarks and yield myself such time as I may consume.

I am proud to join Chairman Pombo as an original cosponsor of this measure, along with the Ranking Member on our Parks Subcommittee, Representative Donna Christensen. We urge our colleagues to approve H.R. 4882.

Mr. Speaker, while the fighting ended more than 30 years ago, our work as a Nation to reconcile with all that took place during the Vietnam era continues.

Just as the Revolutionary War gave birth to our liberty, and the survival of our union through the Civil War and two World Wars gave us strength, the lessons of the Vietnam War can grant us wisdom.

And while the emotions stirred by that War in the hearts and minds of Americans are many and varied, the journey this Nation has taken with regard to Vietnam resembles nothing so much as a journey of grieving. We grieve for the fallen, for the bereft families, for the survivors and their painful scars, and for the wounds inflicted on the country and the people of Vietnam.

Mr. Speaker, the experts tell us that there are stages to the grieving process. In those 30 years, we have experienced them each in turn.

The process began with denial, and with anger. For a time, we denied Vietnam its rightful place in American history as we denied those who fought and died their rightful place in the pantheon of American heroes. And Lord knows we have felt the anger. To our shame, we directed much of that anger at those who served.

We have also lived through what the experts call the "bargaining" phase. We have wished, we have hoped, and we have prayed that things might have turned out differently, that we might, as a Nation, have responded differently. We have tried to negotiate away our failures.

And we have surely endured the next phase: the depression that comes with war and with death. Those who returned from Vietnam, and the families of those who did not, have felt the deep darkness of painful loss. And our Nation as a whole has endured a lingering sadness for so much that was lost during that time.

But finally, Mr. Speaker, we reach the last stage, and it is here that the Vietnam Memorial plays such a powerful role. We have achieved some level of acceptance. We have, however belatedly, begun to treat those who sacrificed for their country in Vietnam with the reverence they have earned. And we have begun to heal.

The Vietnam Memorial is a powerful symbol of that healing and an emotional catalyst for it.

The Wall's designer, the amazingly gifted Maya Lin, described her idea for the Wall as a "rift in the earth." The Wall literally stands as a deep, dark scar on the land, and it represents the deep scar we carry as a Nation.

But a scar is an important part of healing. The National Park Service describes the goal of the Memorial as "nourishing national reconciliation." And in achieving reconciliation, the Memorial has succeeded beyond even the wildest dreams of its most ardent supporters.

More than 20 million people have made the journey to the Memorial, and the journey through the Memorial, leaving millions of personal items in tribute and in memory, and they have felt some measure of healing, of acceptance.

Perhaps more important, the Wall, and the reaction to it by the millions who have seen it, has begun to make Vietnam veterans and their families feel some measure of acceptance as well.

The leadership of the House Resources Committee has pledged to work together, in a bipartisan fashion, to insure that this process of healing and acceptance continues.

A visitor center will broaden and deepen the experience of those who come to the Wall.

A visitor center will educate. Visitors can learn about the 57,939 names that were inscribed on the Wall when it was built and the more than 300 that have been added since.

The center can offer information regarding the 151 people listed on the Wall who, in making the ultimate sacrifice for their country, were awarded the Medal of Honor. Or the 16 clergy members, or the 120 people who hailed from foreign countries. We still have many lessons to learn.

A visitor center can help interpret, as well. The center will provide space for a small sampling of the enormous volume of memorabilia left at the Wall. And, as more and more visitors bring with them less and less personal experience of the war, a visitor center will provide them invaluable context and meaning.

Fittingly, Mr. Speaker, one end of the Vietnam Memorial points directly toward the grand statue of our 16th President housed inside the Lincoln Memorial. Written on the wall of that memorial are words from Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address which also speak to the role of the Vietnam Wall:

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the Nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all Nations.

H.R. 4882 will help finish the work we are in regarding Vietnam. It will help continue the healing provided by the Memorial. It will help bind up the Nation's wounds, and we urge its passage.

Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.